

A 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE:  
*Celebrating the Birth and Growth of Unitarian Universalism*

October 30-31, 2009, Syracuse, New York

When the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) gathers for General Assembly in June, 2011 it will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the UUA. It was on May 15, 1961 that the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Universalist Church of America (UCA) legally consolidated to form the UUA. Like all beginnings, the creation of the UUA did not occur overnight. While movement toward consolidation formally began in 1953 with the creation of the Council of Liberal Churches (CLC), the idea of some sort of merger was in gestation for well over a century.

At times in competition, at times in cooperation, Unitarianism and Universalism developed as liberal forms of Christianity with histories that are closely linked in many ways. Both grew out of the liberal religious impulse present within Christianity from its earliest days. In colonial America, organized liberal religion took the form of Unitarian and Universalist movements that emerged in opposition to the excesses of Calvinism. Unitarianism evolved within the Congregation Churches of New England without a distinct theological focus other than its rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy. Universalism was initially organized as more of a separatist movement focused on the doctrine of universal salvation.

During the nineteenth century the Unitarian and Universalist movements grew as similar yet distinct denominations that shared a common belief in the benevolence of God. Both adopted the critical interpretation of scripture as a method of making personal religious judgments and shared a commitment to reason over dogma. Both denominations emphasized personal development and social action as means to improving the human condition. They also shared a strong commitment to democracy as a way of religious life that values the worth and dignity of every individual, and the power of reason to work out all problems of human life, provided it is liberated from ignorance, prejudice, and dogmatism. As the “twin heresies” of the nineteenth century, many considered Unitarianism and Universalism to differ only in name.

The first formal movement regarding merger came at the AUA National Convention in 1865 when Rev. Samuel Joseph May proposed the formation of a committee to consider union. Little came of May’s proposal until The CLC was created in 1953. The CLC was formed during the first of four joint biennial conferences of the AUA and the UCA that were convened to study and advance a consolidation of activities between the two associations. The creation of the CLC coincided with the administrative consolidation of religious education and public relations for both denominations.

At the 1953 biennial conference, in Andover Mass., a Joint Interim Commission was also created to begin studying the feasibility of full corporate merger. At the 1955 biennial conference, held in Detroit, the Joint Interim Commission reported that the consolidation of functions through the CLC was too clumsy to maintain for long. The Commission asserted that Unitarian and Universalists had “enough in common to become one people,” and recommended full merger. The recommendation of the Commission was endorsed by both denominations and a “Joint Merger Commission” was appointed. By the spring of 1959 it seemed clear that a majority in both denominations supported complete corporate merger. To advance this cause the Commission published a “Plan for Consolidation” that was debated, amended and finally approved at the fourth joint biennial conference held in Syracuse, NY, October 29-31, 1959.

The “Conference at Syracuse” was a critical event in the formation of the UUA. To commemorate the significance of the “Conference at Syracuse,” and to celebrate the growth of the Unitarian Universalist movement in the past fifty years, the St. Lawrence District of the UUA is holding a conference in Syracuse, NY on Friday and Saturday, October 30-31, and Sunday, November 1. This conference will begin Friday night with a dinner and opening ceremony at The First UU Society of Syracuse. On Saturday the conference will convene in the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Syracuse, the actual room where plenary sessions of the 1959 conference took place. The 2009 conference will conclude with a worship service at May Memorial UU Society of Syracuse on Sunday morning for those who may be staying an extra day.

## WHAT HAPPENED AT SYRACUSE?

### *Finding Common Ground in our Theological Diversity*

At the time of consolidation, the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Universalist Church of America (UCA) were considered by most to be cast in the ecclesiastical tradition of the Christian congregational church. In the years after consolidation Unitarian Universalism grew as a religious movement that transcended its Christian heritage to become the spiritual harbor of religious and secular humanists, pagans, deists, theists, atheists and a variety of other faith persuasions. In the fifty years since consolidation the growth of this diversity has made it difficult to develop a common understanding of the distinct nature of Unitarian Universalism, its call, and its promise to the world. In *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, the UUA Commission on Appraisal points to the critical importance of identifying the center of our faith and the common threads that run through our theological diversity. According to the Commission, the process leading toward consolidation focused minimally on theological differences and primarily on resolving methodological issues. The effort was successful in creating a common institutional structure so that consolidation could be achieved. However, many theological and spiritual issues remained unresolved.

October 31, 2009 marks that day fifty years earlier when delegates of the AUA and UCA overcame the final obstacles and adopted the "Plan for Consolidation." This dramatic event played out in downtown Syracuse, NY. To celebrate this pivotal moment in the growth of Unitarian Universalism we will be returning to the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Syracuse, the central site of the 1959 conference. The 2009 conference will be a celebration of our history. It will also be a quest to advance our future by exploring the meaning of "What Happened at Syracuse?" along with the development of Unitarian Universalism in the past fifty years. In general sessions, workshops, and worship four questions will guide our quest:

- 1) Where did we come from?
- 2) What has happened to the Unitarian Universalist movement since the Conference at Syracuse?
- 3) What do our principles, purposes and practices say about our identity?
- 4) What is our future?

Four prominent UU scholars will be on hand to share their insights and perspectives about the meaning of "What Happened at Syracuse." **David Bumbaugh, David Parke, Richard Gilbert** and **Elizabeth Strong** have each played important leadership roles in the growth of the Unitarian Universalist movement. They will bring a considerable body of experience and great insight to bear on these four questions.

### Conference Program

**Friday, October 30, 2009:** Opening Ceremonies at the First Unitarian Universalist Society

**5:00 P.M.** Registration and in-gathering

**6:00 P.M.** Dinner at First Unitarian Universalist in Syracuse

**7:00 P.M.** Music from the period sung by the choirs of Central New York UU congregations

**7:20 P.M.** Telling the Story: "What happened at Syracuse?" **Elizabeth Strong & David Parke**

**Saturday, October 31, 2009:** Grand Ballroom at the Hotel Syracuse

**9-10:00 A.M.** Opening program: "The past 50 years?" **Elizabeth Strong & David Bumbaugh**

**10:15 – 11:15 A.M.** Morning round of workshops

**11:30 – 12:15 A.M.** Worship Service: "It Was Just Before Noon..." **Dick Gilbert**

**12:30 – 1:30 P.M.** Lunch

**1:45 – 2:45 P.M.** Afternoon round of workshops

**3-4:00 P.M.** Concluding discussion: **Elizabeth Strong, David Parke, David Bumbaugh & Dick Gilbert**

**Sunday, November 1, 2009, 10:30 AM:** Worship Service at May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society

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